

Why Lieutenants Should Study Strategy

by Col Michael D. Wylly



That lieutenants ought to first learn the basics is an easily agreed upon tenet of educating an officer. But agreement begins to crumble apart immediately when we ask "What are the basics?" A look at what we have done in the past couple of centuries, however, would reveal that we have regarded the basics to dwell in the realm of tactics and not strategy. I disagree. I do not reject tactics as being an important *part* of the basics; but if strategy is not studied in parallel, tactics are meaningless—and perhaps as well not even studied. I can even go so far as to say tactics without strategy are dangerous.

Wars, after all, are not won by the side that wins the most battles. They are won by the side that wins the *right* battles. The wrong battles, whether won or lost, occupy valuable units that might be better used elsewhere and waste good men. But before we get into why this is important to lieutenants, who generally will fight the battles they are told to fight, let us consider the educational process itself.

Clausewitz obviously had something in mind when he wrote, "In war more than in any subject we must begin by looking at the nature of the whole; for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together." The basics, Clausewitz is saying, are understanding what battle is all about. Given that battle is about winning wars, the first step to understanding battle is understanding war. So, how does the 21-year-old student, who has never been shot at, come to understand war? Of course, we must get him to the field. He must experience living out of the pack on his back. He must move units of men through rough terrain, control formations he is responsible for but cannot see, save for the few Marines close around him. He must hear the sounds of the guns, move with live ammunition close overhead, call artillery and air—live, high explosive ordnance—at "danger-close." He must learn to endure hardship while cheering his men to keep morale up, even in cold, rain, and

mud. But he could do all this and still know nothing of war. It might turn him into a great outdoorsman. He may become an expert on weapons, a splendid leader. He might even learn enough from the veterans around him about *their* war to refight it if it reoccurs—which it will not.

But if he is to understand war, he must study war. This can be difficult in an age when we are surrounded by and bombarded with advice from self-proclaimed experts on war. Many have written books. Some of these authors are combat veterans and some are not, but whether or not they have seen combat does not determine whether or not they are experts. There are veterans of Vietnam who are experts on Vietnam but not on other wars. Some senior soldiers have seen two or three wars. But one aspect of the most recent, Vietnam, was that the more senior had the least idea what was really happening. They were the most fascinated by the body counts. And they ought to be listened to least about Vietnam, though they may be experts on World War II and Korea.

So to learn about war, the student cannot find many experts. What he must do is study as many wars as he can. Guerrilla wars, limited wars, cold wars, hot wars, long wars, short wars, static wars, mobile wars—all should be studied in the way that a historian studies. That is, trying to identify what actually happened and why. He must read multiple sources on the same wars and then as in solving a resection problem in map reading, he must look for evidence to converge as the azimuths on a map and draw conclusions.

I am often confronted by the question, "How can we teach our Marines to fight when we do not know what kind of war the next one will be?" We do not know if it will be a counterinsurgency in the jungle, a mobile war in the desert, or urban war in Europe. I say it is exactly for this reason that lieutenants should be reading history more than field manuals. Field manu-

als are formulas. They are techniques that may serve in one kind of war but not in another. They add little to understanding. So to be educated about war, one needs to know what has happened in war. He must study the results of war and ask himself why the results were what they were.

But should the lieutenant be studying battles or wars? Tactics or strategy? My answer is that he must first study strategy. He must study war as a whole. It is well known that the German Army, whose education in tactics I admire, had an inadequate grasp of strategy. In learning of Count Alfred von Schlieffen's plan to conquer France, no officer of influence questioned the wisdom of attacking through Belgium, though this strategic blunder would bring England in, and England would bring America in, and America would defeat them.

But let us consider the problem at a more basic level. Try studying battles only. Read only at the tactical level. What will you read? Your sources will be extremely limited. There are few books that dwell exclusively at the tactical level, but they are very few. Most good historical works cross the boundaries of tactics and strategy without warning again and again. If one decided to limit himself to study about battles alone, he would deprive himself of Blumenson on Patton, Churchill on World War II, Manstein on the Eastern Front, Potter on Nimitz, James on MacArthur, and Caesar on Gaul. He would exclude most of Clausewitz, Mahan, Jomini, Liddell Hart, and a great deal of Fuller, all essential in building the most fundamental foundation in the basics of warfare.

And then there is the subject of the operational art. It is said that there is a level of war between tactics and strategy. It is the operational art or the conduct of campaigns. While tactics govern the fighting of battles and strategy the fighting of wars, the operational art governs the fighting of campaigns. The operational art, too, is part of the whole

strategy. Patton once wrote that no general should ever involve himself in tactics. In his diary entry of 23 February 1944, he wrote:

I am sometimes appalled at the density of human beings. I am also nauseated by the fact that Hodges and Bradley state that all human virtue depends on knowing infantry tactics. I know that no general officer and practically no colonel needs to know any tactics. The tactics belong to battalion commanders. If generals knew less tactics, they would interfere less.

We could hardly say that all generalship ought to be at the strategic level, however. That is, divisional and corps commanders are usually not advising the President on how to effect national policy through military means. Sometimes, perhaps, but usually not. And I will even argue with Patton, that sometimes generals must implement battle tactics at the division level. But usually generalship is, indeed, somewhere in between the battles and the war, and that area in between is the planning and conduct of campaigns. It is sometimes difficult to identify where strategy leaves off and the operational art begins and then where the boundary lies that brings us down to tactics. There will be disagreement among scholars over where one leaves off and the other begins. And it is hardly possible to understand one level in isolation of the others. So, as Clausewitz said, one must study the whole. The best education for war is studying war, as it has actually taken place.

Our contemporaries are correct that the operational art does have to be understood. As an integral part of strategy, however, it cannot be understood without a good grasp of strategy. The operational art is the bridge that gives battle tactics strategic aim. So, lieutenants must study strategy!

It was at the operational level, especially, that we lost Vietnam. Marines and soldiers at the tactical level fought well. They won their battles. But the campaigns—if any can really be identified—seemed to lack direction. They lacked strategic purpose. And if, indeed, cohesive planning at the operational level was being done, it was not getting down to us at the tactical level. Our strategy in Vietnam can be blamed, too. But it has been easy to place the blame for flawed strategy at the Washington level. Generals have claimed that civilians were meddling in strategy. Maybe they



Adms Leahy and King, and Gen Marshall confer with President Roosevelt aboard USS Quincy in Malta.

were. But what were the generals doing about it? It seemed to me then, and it seems to me now, that we were lacking in generalship, that Vietnam was being called a platoon leaders war not because it needed to be one but because the generals did not understand their role, did not know what to do, and either oversupervised at the tactical level or stayed in the rear, enamored with statistics. I am not saying there was no endeavor to plan campaigns. I am saying that the planning that was done did not work. And the slowness to achieve any effect eventually led to the disenchantment at home that we so quickly point to as the scapegoat for our shortcoming.

If civilians were meddling in our business in Washington, why were they? Where was generalship of the quality that won the confidence of a President as George C. Marshall won the confidence of President Roosevelt? FDR promised Marshall command of the cross-channel invasion. Yet when the time came he had to break his promise. "I could not sleep at night," the President told the general, "with you out of Washington." We were at war. And the President of the United States needed advice on strategy. He needed the advice of a professional. A professional, someone who had studied warfare all his life. Marshall was such a man, and all Washington knew it. Our policymakers took his advice, and we won the war.

Now, back to lieutenants, and why they should study strategy. Generals, after all, are former lieutenants. But there must be more to being a general than old age. There must be more than experi-

ence. There must be a *lifetime* of study—that is, if the general is to consider himself a professional. That we can take a tactician, a battalion commander, for instance, and "add water" by sending him to a war college and have—voilà!—a general, is a delusion. It takes a lifetime of study. And a military lifetime begins at lieutenant. Lieutenants must study strategy.

But even the lieutenants who will never be generals need to understand strategy if they are to fight their battles effectively. Any task is done better, more efficiently, if the one performing the task knows why. If the lieutenant is not sure whether he is supposed to win his battle to increase the number of enemy deaths, to seize the hill, to cut off the enemy retreat, to deny the enemy something, or to acquire something for friendlies to use, he cannot fight the battle as well. Do I destroy the airfield or keep it in tact for our use? Do I dismount and become inextricably engaged? Or do I roll on by, leaving the enemy isolated as I place priority on speed? These questions can only be answered if the lieutenant knows why. And if he knows why, he learns more, and when he is a captain or a major or a colonel and responsible for choosing his battles, where and when to fight, he will be better equipped to do so. And if he knows about war and its many, many forms, he will not be narrowed and restricted by doctrine, by lists of principles that are not really principles but checklists, or by field manuals written by experts on the last war. Having studied war as a whole, he is ready for the unknown. Ready for anything. US&MC